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Take Action Now!

# Restore Saemangeum!

Forty Thousand Hectares: Forty thousand emails

Friday 19 October 2007, by [Collective / Multiple signers](#) (Date first published: 18 October 2007).

**Saemangeum, the once glorious estuary on the west coast of South Korea, is dying. Open the sea-gates now. Restore Saemangeum!**

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In April, 2006, dumper trucks poured their final loads of rubble and rock into the last remaining gap in a 33-km long dyke, and closed off 40,000 hectares of this vast estuary from the sea. With almost no tide, the shellfish beds - that had until that day supported the world's largest concentration of Great Knot - started to die. **By April 2007, most of Saemangeum's tidal-flats had either been flooded, or turned into desert - huge expanses of drying mud, littered with dead shells, plastic, and even fishing boats - all part of a massive "reclamation" project, with still no clear end-use.**

As South Korean lawmakers debate Saemangeum's future, we need to send them a clear message, 40,000 times, one email for every hectare of wetland being destroyed:

Let them know that:

- Saemangeum is still internationally important for shorebirds [see below], still supporting species like the rapidly-declining Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper.
- South Korea is a signatory to the Ramsar Convention [see below], and will even host the next Ramsar Conference of the Parties in 2008. It is time for South Korea to honor the obligations of this Convention.

We need urgently to open the sluice-gates in the Saemangeum seawall, to restore more of the tidal-flow, and bring life back to some of the estuary.

The neighboring Geum Estuary is still threatened with "reclamation" (a euphemism for the damming and destruction of intertidal wetland). This site too is extremely important internationally, and needs to be protected by national law and designated a Ramsar site.

Join us: Act Now. Click here: <http://www.restoresaemangeum.com/uk...> or on the "To sign" above and add your voice today.

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## **Saemangeum and the Geum: South Korea's jewels in the crown**

Saemangeum - vital to both birds and people. An estimated 25,000 people depended on Saemangeum's tidal-flats and sea-shallows for their livelihoods. Image Jan van de Kam.

The west coast of South Korea has some of the widest and most naturally productive tidal flats and estuaries in the world. They support specialised waterbirds like the Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Nordmann's Greenshank and Black-faced Spoonbill, hundreds of thousands of migrant shorebirds each year, and a once rich fishing industry.

In the past few decades, however, almost half of these tidal flats have been reclaimed - impounded, converted to land and reservoirs: "lost". The impacts on water quality and inshore fisheries appear dramatic; the impacts on shorebirds, largely unmeasured, have most likely been immense.

Saemangeum (pronounced Say-Man-Gum) is the name given to the largest and most destructive of these reclamation projects. It is massive on every scale, entailing the construction of the world's longest sea-dyke (33 kilometres) to dam two estuaries (the Mangyeung and the Dongjin) and 40,100 hectares of tidal-flats and sea-shallows that together comprised the single most important shorebird site not only in South Korea, but in the whole of the Yellow Sea.

The Saemangeum area has regularly supported at least 27 species of waterbird in Ramsar-defined internationally important concentrations. During northward migration in 2007, one year after sea-wall closure, it still supported over 88,000 shorebirds with 13 of these species in internationally important concentrations, including the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. With continuing deterioration, the site will be unable to support many shorebirds. With the sea-gates fully open, with improved tides and reduced water pollution, it will be able to retain some of its international importance.

Saemangeum was at the heart of what was once a 60 kilometre wide super-estuary system, fed by three rivers: the Mangyeung and Dongjin (Saemangeum), and the Geum. The Geum, although barraged and industrial along part of its shore, still opens up into one of Korea's most beautiful and bird-rich estuaries, with several thousand hectares of complex tidal-flats and shallows. Following the demise of Saemangeum, it has become South Korea's most important shorebird site. During northward migration in 2007, the Saemangeum Shorebird Monitoring Program recorded a minimum of 119,000 shorebirds in the Geum Estuary, with 13 of these species in internationally important concentrations.

This whole area had also been targeted for reclamation. However, in September 2006, South Korea's Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries announced their opposition to the reclamation, and local government also announced their opposition in May 2007. Through sending emails and letters we can show strong support for their bold decision.

Act Now to urge the formal protection of the Geum Estuary, and win its designation as a Ramsar site, in time for the October 2008 Ramsar Conference in South Korea.

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*Spoon-billed Sandpipers. In the late 1990s, 200 Spoon-billed Sandpiper were reported at Saemangeum. In May 2007, only 31 remained - out of a world population estimated at only 1000 individuals. Image Trevor Feltham.*

During April and May 2006, Saemangeum supported over 198,000 migratory shorebirds. By April and May 2007, this number had fallen to less than 90,000.

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## **South Korea and the Ramsar Convention: The Very Odd Couple**

Leadership in conserving wetlands and the environment? The 33km long seawall dams two estuaries and the most important shorebird site in the Yellow Sea.

Dead Spoon-billed Sandpiper at Saemangeum. This species is undergoing an extremely rapid decline - believed due in large part to coastal reclamation. Image Nial Moores, Birds Korea.

The Ramsar Convention is the inter-governmental convention dedicated to the "wise use" of wetlands worldwide.

Through its well-established system of Resolutions and Sites of International Importance, the Convention provides the framework to help guide 154 of the world's nations (the Contracting Parties) towards the sustainable and equitable use of wetlands. The decisions of the Convention are endorsed every three years at its Conferences of the Parties (COPs), with the next Convention to be hosted by the government of South Korea, in the southern city of Changwon, between October 28 and November 4<sup>th</sup> 2008.

There is no doubt how the South Korean Ministry of Environment intends to use the Ramsar 2008 Conference of the Parties: "It will be a great opportunity for Korea to promote globally its wetland policies and well-preserved wetlands and to enhance the image of the country as a leader in conserving wetlands and the environment."

[http://eng.me.go.kr/docs/news/print\\_press.html?seq=345](http://eng.me.go.kr/docs/news/print_press.html?seq=345).

A simple analysis of South Korea's Ramsar record is much less flattering:

As of June 4 2007, South Korea had only designated 5 Ramsar sites nationwide, totaling a derisory 4450 hectares, out of a world total of 150,228,225 hectares of Ramsar-designated wetland.

Korea's total Ramsar site area is equivalent to little more than one tenth of the area of the Saemangeum reclamation project (40,100 ha). This ranks Korea - the world's 11<sup>th</sup> largest economy - about 132<sup>nd</sup> among contracting parties to the Ramsar Convention in terms of wetland area with Ramsar designation.

South Korea historically had 450,000 ha of tidal-flats and now has little over 200,000 ha remaining, this area is likely to be still further reduced to only 110,000 ha within the coming decade.

South Korea: a “leader” in conserving wetlands and the environment?

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